



South Coast Air Quality Management District

FACT SHEET

Clean Air and the National Transportation System

Background

On August 10, 2005, the President signed the most recent federal surface transportation bill into law. Known as the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, or simply, SAFETEA-LU. This law guaranteed funding for highways, highway safety, and public transportation totaling \$244.1 billion over 5 years and represented the largest surface transportation investment in the nation's history. Included in SAFETEA-LU, are provisions to provide for "Environmental Stewardship." This law retained and increased funding for environmental programs, and added new environmentally-focused programs such as a pilot program for nonmotorized transportation. SAFETEA-LU also included significant new environmental requirements for the statewide and metropolitan planning processes.



Health Impacts of Air Pollution

Since 1991, Congress has recognized the transportation sector can be used to improve public health and the quality of our environment, all while improving the economy. Mobile sources such as on-road vehicles create the vast majority of air pollution and contribute to severe health impacts including thousands of premature deaths every year. Particulate pollution (such as diesel soot) is estimated to cause 6,200 premature deaths per year in Southern California alone, with an average reduction in life of ten years.



Since 1987, more than two dozen community health studies have linked particulate pollution to reductions in lung function, increased hospital and emergency room admissions, and premature deaths. Recently, two major epidemiological studies showed that people living in more polluted cities had an increased risk of premature death compared to those in cleaner cities.



About the South Coast Air Quality Management District

The South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) is the air pollution control agency for all of Orange County and the urban portions of Los Angeles, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. It is both the oldest air district in the nation and the district covering the largest population. Its area of 10,743 square miles is home to over 16 million people - about half the population of the whole state of California.

It is the second most populated urban area in the United States and one of the smoggiest. SCAQMD is responsible for controlling emissions primarily from stationary sources of air pollution, but has some authority over mobile sources. Through its efforts, and those of the state, air quality in Southern California over the past decades has continually improved despite an enormous increase in population and cars. SCAQMD is also a leader in researching and promoting alternative fuel technologies.

The Challenges We Face

The federal highway and rail systems are critical for goods movement, economic growth, national security and job creation. As our population has grown, so has congestion on our highways and railroads. Despite this increased use, our nation has not adequately funded maintenance of our highways, bridges, and railroads. In addition, there is a growing concern about climate change and a desire to reduce the level of greenhouse gases contributed by the transportation sector. With this concern, and high gas prices, many people are moving away from standard gasoline-powered engines and toward alternative fuel vehicles. With less gasoline being purchased, revenues from gasoline taxes have dipped significantly reducing the amount in the Federal Highway Trust Fund. This situation presents both challenges and opportunities. As Congress explores other funding streams, it must also look at ways to get the most for the money it does spend. Projects that achieve multiple benefits must be prioritized. And consideration of air quality as part of the next surface transportation legislation is critical.

Issues to Consider for the Federal Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill

Transportation Projects Must Do More to Cut Air Pollution

Given the health risks and attainment requirements, there is a clear need to reduce mobile source emissions through all feasible measures. One way this has been attempted is through efforts to reduce traffic congestion on the nation's highways. If appropriately designed and operated, projects to reduce congestion can also help improve air quality. All too often, however, projects to reduce congestion are only minimally beneficial to air quality. But all transportation projects should be developed with air quality improvements in mind, and funding should be provided in ways that prioritize air quality.

The CMAQ Program Must Be Protected

The Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ) is a valuable program authorized in the past federal surface transportation laws which provides funds for transportation or transportation-related projects which either reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality, or do both. This program provides the only dedicated federal funding source for programs to reduce the air quality impact of transportation infrastructure projects, and it must be protected and strengthened. Congestion relief is one of the most pressing and difficult transportation challenges we face. CMAQ needs to authorize more funding for air quality, and to disallow the transfer of unused funds to other transportation programs. There also needs to be greater accountability so that projects, once built, are assessed to determine whether the projected air quality benefits are being achieved. Currently there is minimal follow-up to determine how successful a program is, and whether further mitigation measures are necessary. Air districts are uniquely situated to provide these assessment services.

The Nation's Goods Movement Chain Must be Cleaner and More Efficient

Our nation's goods movement chain plays a critical role in our nation's economy. As it continues to expand, we need to make the goods movement chain both more efficient and cleaner. One way to do this is to expedite the recently adopted EPA standards for locomotives and move less freight by dirty trucks. Trucks that are on the road need to be cleaner, and our rail system needs to convert to cleaner technologies. In the most highly polluted regions, zero or near-zero emission technology will be needed.

Don't Ignore Other Pollutants When Addressing Climate Change

With concern over climate change and the carbon emissions caused by our nation's over-reliance on fossil fuels to run their cars, trucks, buses, trains and other vehicles, it is clear that the next surface transportation bill will have to seek ways to address the many challenges we face in this area. We need to cut down on carbon emissions, but at the same time, must not forget that while carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases affect the climate, other criteria and toxic pollutants (such as particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen oxides (NOx)) pose significant health risks to everyone. Strategies to tackle greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, if appropriately chosen, can also assure reductions in other critical pollutants (e.g., electrification, particularly where electricity is generated from renewable sources like wind and solar).

Clean Construction Equipment Should Be Utilized

One of the key ways to reduce emissions is to make sure that construction equipment uses low emission fuel. Nonroad diesel engines can contribute significantly to the levels of particulate matter (PM) and nitrogen oxides (NOx) in the air. In recent years, federal emissions standards have been established for engines used in most new construction equipment. However, because construction equipment has a useful life of 25 to 30 years, it takes many years before existing equipment is replaced with new, cleaner equipment. The Surface Transportation Bill should seek ways to assure that contractors, owners, and operators of construction equipment are using the cleanest technologies and strategies available for new construction and for repairs of existing transportation infrastructure.

Air Agencies Should Play a Larger Role in The Process

Air agencies are uniquely qualified to conduct evaluations of air quality impacts of funded transportation projects. They have a thorough knowledge of air quality needs and the State Implementation Plan (SIP) required by the federal Clean Air Act. In addition, they are generally independent of transportation agencies whose missions are not primarily focused on environmental needs. Decisions to fund projects or programs should be made with involvement by state air quality agencies or, in states which have local air quality agencies, by local agencies and such funding must be consistent with the respective State Implementation Plan. At a minimum, air agencies should approve emissions impact estimates and determine compliance with air quality funding criteria, and can conduct assessments to assure the projected air benefits were met.

For more information, please contact SCAQMD staff at (909) 396-2432.

